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COPENHAGEN FOR ESTH OFFICE

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SUBJECT: Estonia: Red light on HIV prevention in schools

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¶1. Summary: Estonia's Ministry of Education has resisted pressure to continue funding HIV education courses previously implemented under Estonia's Global Fund program. As a result, few schools have provided any HIV-related courses in 2008. Slowing economic growth and a tight budget could result in a decrease in GOE spending on HIV programs in 2009. Post is actively engaged with policy makers, members of parliament and the NGO sector to keep HIV on the GOE agenda. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In September 2007 Estonia graduated from the UN Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria (GF) program (REF A). The GF had spent \$10 million over four years on HIV programs in Estonia. One of the six key objectives under Global Fund was HIV prevention work with Estonian youth. Over the course of the program, more than 88,000 students attended special HIV prevention course in schools, 27,000 youth participated in peer-to-peer HIV courses and GF trainers distributed more than 200,000 condoms and 100,000 information booklets.

¶3. (SBU) When the GF program ended in September 2007, the Government of Estonia (GOE) committed to continue funding all GF activities. Under Estonian law, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) was given responsibility for overall coordination of HIV-related activities. All other ministries involved in the fight with HIV/AIDS - including the Ministry of Defense (MOD) the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and the Ministry of Education and Research (MOER) - were tasked with securing adequate resources to continue funding HIV programs. All ministries met this obligation in 2008 except the MOER, which did not obtain funds for HIV-specific school programs and discontinued cooperation with the NGOs that had provided training in schools under the GF program. As a result, very few schools have provided any HIV prevention courses for their students in 2008.

¶4. (SBU) In December 2007, the Embassy hosted a briefing for members of the diplomatic community on the status of Estonia's HIV/AIDS epidemic and GOE prevention/treatment programs. (REF B) At the briefing, the MOER outlined the Ministry's ongoing efforts to develop a new comprehensive curriculum for Estonian schools that would include HIV specific health education. In May, MOER's Deputy Undersecretary told us the ministry hoped to launch the new curriculum in 2010. However, MOER has been working on developing this new curriculum since 2000 (when the HIV epidemic started in Estonia.) In our

estimate, it is unlikely MOER will be ready to launch the new curriculum before the end of 2010 - leaving at least a three year gap in which Estonian school children do not receive vital information on HIV/AIDS.

MOER also has not been able to respond to questions regarding when and how teachers will be trained in the new materials. This means implementation of the curriculum will likely take even longer.

15. (SBU) Over the course of the last 10 months, in addition to meetings at MOER, Pol/Econ Chief and ESTH Specialist have met with representatives of MOSA, the Parliament's Social Affairs Committee, the World Health Organization (WHO), diplomats from other Embassies and the NGO Community to discuss our concerns regarding HIV education in Estonia. At all of the meetings, except with MOER, our interlocutors echoed concerns regarding the gap in HIV prevention education programs. The GOE's own HIV coordinating committee has discussed the issue and urged the MOER to address it on several occasions. (Note: The committee includes representatives from the GOE, NGOs, WHO and the parliament and reports directly to the cabinet on a biannual basis. End Note.) On July 29 the Minister of Education and Research finally allocated \$140,000 for peer-to-peer programs in the schools. MOER will use the NGOs that worked previously with the GF Program to implement these courses. While this is certainly a positive step, it will only affect a fraction of Estonia's school children.

17. (SBU) Comment: During the Global Fund Program,

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Estonia regularly received praise for its implementation efforts and the high level of engagement of the third sector (NGOs) in implementing HIV programs. However, we are concerned now that the GOE is having trouble fulfilling the commitments it took when the GF ended its program in Estonia. Estonian economic growth has slowed significantly this year and ministries will face significant budget cuts this fall. We believe MOER's lack of follow-through on funding HIV programs is already setting a bad precedent. Other ministries including the MOJ (which provides HIV courses in prisons) and the MOD (HIV courses for recruits) are also considering some reduction in the size of their HIV programs.

18. (SBU) Comment cont. Estonia has the highest HIV growth rate in Europe and health issues are a key component of our Mission Strategic Plan goal of promoting economic growth and development in Estonia.

Post will continue its efforts to engage policy-makers at all levels on the importance of funding HIV programs. In September, Pol/Econ Chief will publish an OpEd in Estonia's widest circulation Estonian- and Russian-language newspapers highlighting the importance of education programs in HIV prevention. In October, six Estonian HIV experts will participate in Voluntary Visitor program (VolVis) focused on HIV case management. Post has also received approval for one of the key officials involved in drafting Estonia's new school curriculum to participate in an FY09 International Visitor Leadership Program focused on HIV education.

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